DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 231 749 SO 014 989

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TITLE The Social Study of Science and Society: The Implications of Political Specialization for Social Science Curriculum Development.
PUB DATE 11 Jun 83
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Social Science Education Consortium (Athens, GA, June 8-11, 1983).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Controversial Issues (Course Content); *Current Events; Curriculum Development; Higher Education; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Political Issues; *Political Science; Relevance (Education); Secondary Education; Social Sciences; Social Studies; *Student Interests
IDENTIFIERS Computer Uses in Education

ABSTRACT

Given the lack of interest among college and high school students and the declining rates of participation in political affairs, the concept of political specialization has significant implications for teaching political science. Research reveals that almost 90 percent of high school students who do not plan to attend college are either completely apolitical or without any specific issue interest; approximately 44 percent of college students fall into the same category. To address this problem, the political science curriculum (as well as the social science curriculum in general) can develop courses focusing on political specialization. Two basic models may be implemented. One involves the creation of courses that present the intersection of politics and a substantive area, e.g., a course on science and society, nuclear power, air pollution, or acid rain. Students would take selected roles in the controversy and develop strategies to seek a given policy outcome. The second model involves the simultaneous use of "cases" from several substantive areas, with students selecting those cases or issues of greatest interest to them. Examples are the construction of a new sports arena (for athletically minded students), establishment of a publicly funded civic orchestra (for music students), or the creation of an economic development authority (for business students). In each case, the problem would be posed with conflicting roles and the solution would require a working knowledge of the political system. (KC)

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The Social Study of Science and Society:

The implications of political specialization for social science curriculum development.

A paper presented to the annual meeting of the Social Science Education Consortium.

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June 11, 1983

SO 014 989

INTRODUCTION

At our 1982 annual meeting, I presented a paper outlining a theory of political specialization (Miller, 1982) and a number of people asked for more specification concerning the implications of that model for curriculum development in the social sciences. The purpose of this paper is to outline two general approaches to the application of the concept and to discuss in somewhat greater detail the application of the idea to the social study of science and technology.

A REVIEW OF THE POLITICAL SPECIALIZATION MODEL

Political specialization involves two separate but simultaneous processes -- interest specialization and issue specialization. Interest specialization refers to the selection by an individual of areas of major life interest. In modern society, no individual is able to develop or maintain an interest in the full range of potential activities available}. Time is finite and the process of interest specialization is inevitable.

In general terms, it can be argued that the proportion of American adults who place a relatively high priority on political affairs in the context of interest specialization has been declining in recent decades. Some observers have suggested that this is a reflection on the character of modern politics, but I think that it is more likely a reflection of the relative attractiveness of politics to the expanding range of non-political alternatives. Whatever the reason, there is clear evidence that the levelof political participation over the last four decades has been declining.

Issue specialization refers to the selection of issues or topics to which an individual will devote his or her efforts. At any given point in time, there is a wide range of issues and problems on national, state, and local political agendas and no individual has the time or ability to follow all of them. Inevitably, each individual focused his of her attention on a smaller number of issues. Recent surveys of American adults indicate that the model number of issues followed among those persons interested in political events at all is two (Miller, Prewitt, Pearson, 1980; Miller, 1983). In a national study of high school and college students in 1978 (Miller, Suchner, Voelker, 1980), we were able to identify the emergence of issue attentiveness during the high school and college years.

The combination of interest specialization and issue specialization is referred to as political specialization. It is possible to operationalize these concepts for the young adults in the 1978 National Public Affairs Study. Students were dichotomized into a high and low group in terms of the salience of politics. The same respondents were divided into those individuals that were attentive to no political issues, to one or two issues, and to three or more issues.

The cross-classification of the salience of politics and the level of issue attentiveness produces a typology of political specialization among young adults (see Table 1). The resulting data are disappointing by any yardstick and suggest that the future of political participation in the American political system is not likely to improve in theshort-run. For example, almost 90 per cent of high school students who do not plan to attend college are either completely apol-

itical or without any specific issue interest. Approximately 44 per cent of college students in 1978 fell into the same categories.

Given the political specialization context and these specific data, it is clear that there are special problems in trying to teach young adults about politics. If the political specialization model is helpful in understanding the source of the of the problems in social science education, does it also provide any guidance in the solution of the problem?

TABLE 1

Political Specialization Among Young Adults

Educational Status	Salience of Politics	Number of Issues Followed: 0	1-2	3-4	N
Typology	Low	apoliticals	narrow issue specialists	broad issue specialists	
	High	ritual citizenship	narrow issue activists	broad issue activists	
High School Non-College Bound	Low	61%	5%	1%	1218
	High	28	5	0	
High School College Bound	Low	40	12	1	1098
	High	27	16	5	
College	Low	28	23	8	1422
	High	16	15	10	

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

It appears to me that the political specialization model does indeed suggest several approaches for social science educators. First, it is clear from both the conceptual model and from the 1978 data that the root of the problem concerns low levels of interest in traditional political issues and problems. A low level of interest in political affairs is not the same thing as political alienation, and a separate analysis of the 1978 data indicated that alienation accounted for very little of the differences in the saliency of politics to young adults.

Second, the acquisition and retention of political and related social science information appears to be the result of a relatively higher level of interest in political affairs. There is little evidence in the data that higher levels of political information precede or lead to increased political interest.

Given these two conclusions, it would appeat that the major implication of the political specialization model is that it is essential to stimulate interest in political affairs as a preface to more traditional teaching or information transmission activities. The critical question becomes how might the social science curriculum be presented so as to stimulate the needed interest and to convey the substantive information that we feel is necessary.

TWO BASIC MODELS

While there may be several effective approaches to this problem, I would suggest that many of the techniques might be usefully grouped into two basic models. One model involves the creation of courses or sections that involve the intersection of politics and a given substantive area. Courses or modules focusing on science and society would be one example of this approach. A second model would involve the simultaneous use of "cases" from several different substantive areas, with students selecting those cases or issues that are of greatest interest to them. It may be useful to describe each of these models in somewhat greater detail.

The intersection model is usefully characterized by science and society courses. In these courses or units, students with an interest in science or technology issues can be engaged in the study of public policy problems and drawn into the study of political and related social science areas. At the collegiate level, courses in the politics of science, the politics of nuclear power, and the politics of environmental issues have been popular at the undergraduate level. While it is unlikely that a whole course could be devoted to this subject at the middle, junior, or senior high school levels, it appears to be feasible to develop a course that would involve several case studies in science and technology issues.

More specifically, Alan Voelker and I have been working on a course design that would use a set of cases or issues that would involve nuclear power, air pollution, water pollution, acid rain, waste disposal, and either laetrile or fluoridation. The modules would pose

a dispute and ask students to take selected roles in the controversy and to seek to develop strategies to advance a given policy outcome. The roles would bring students, or groups of students, into conflict over preferred public policy results. In order to development a successful strategy, it would be necessary for the students to become knowledgeable about selected governmental and political processes. Through the careful selection of cases, it would be necessary for each student to become familiar with the division of responsibilities in the federal system and the organization and procedures of major branches of government at all three levels. A successful solution would also require a student to become familiar with selected scientific concepts and with the rules of evidence employed in scientific thinking. When successful, the modules would produce both scientific and political literacy.

The second basic model would be similar in structure, but might include a wider array of substantive cases. For each, cases might be developed that would include the construction of a new sports arena (for athletically interested students), the establishment of a publically funded civic orchestra (for musically minded students), or the creation of an economic development authority (for business students). In each case, the problem could be posed with conflicting roles and the successful solution to the problem would rest in developing a working knowledge of the political system. This approach would begin with the areas of high interest for students and seek to show the salience of the political process for issues in that area. It would not presume a prior interest in political affairs.

SUMMARY

The concept of political specialization has significant implications for the teaching of social science generally, and for the teaching of politics in particular. It is clear that relatively few young adults of high school or college age have a strong interest in political or public policy matters generally, pointing toward even lower levels of political participation in the future. If this trend is to be reversed, it is important to begin by using the areas of interest that already exist and then demonstrating the salience of political processes to those pre-existing areas of interest. I have tried this approach at the collegiate level and am confident that it works at that level. I believe that the same approach can be moved into the secondary curriculum.

Given the strong national interest in scientific and technological literacy and aparallel concern about declining rates of popular participation in political affiars, it would seem to be an appropriate time to try to link the teaching of the two areas. I think that the greatest progress could be made in the short-run in the area of science and society courses, but would hope that the logical development of the process would eventually lead to more comprehensive sets of cases and problems.

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